

CHAPTER XI

Back on board, Van Horn immediately hove short, hoisted sail, broke out the anchor, and filled away for the ten-mile beat up the lagoon to windward that would fetch Somo. On the way, he stopped at Binu to greet Chief Johnny and land a few Binu returns. Then it was on to Somo, and to the end of voyaging for ever of the Arangi and of many that were aboard of her.

Quite the opposite to his treatment at Langa-Langa was that accorded Van Horn at Somo. Once the return boys were put ashore, and this was accomplished no later than three-thirty in the afternoon, he invited Chief Bashti on board. And Chief Bashti came, very nimble and active despite his great age, and very good-natured--so good-natured, in fact, that he insisted on bringing three of his elderly wives on board with him. This was unprecedented. Never had he permitted any of his wives to appear before a white man, and Van Horn felt so honoured that he presented each of them with a gay clay pipe and a dozen sticks of tobacco.

Late as the afternoon was, trade was brisk, and Bashti, who had taken the lion's share of the wages due to the fathers of two boys who had died, bought liberally of the Arangi's stock. When Bashti promised plenty of fresh recruits, Van Horn, used to the changeableness of the savage mind, urged signing them up right away. Bashti demurred, and suggested next

day. Van Horn insisted that there was no time like the present, and so well did he insist that the old chief sent a canoe ashore to round up the boys who had been selected to go away to the plantations.

"Now, what do you think?" Van Horn asked of Borckman, whose eyes were remarkably fishy. "I never saw the old rascal so friendly. Has he got something up his sleeve?"

The mate stared at the many canoes alongside, noted the numbers of women in them, and shook his head.

"When they're starting anything they always send the Marys into the bush," he said.

"You never can tell about these niggers," the captain grumbled. "They may be short on imagination, but once in a while they do figure out something new. Now Bashti's the smartest old nigger I've ever seen. What's to prevent his figuring out that very bet and playing it in reverse? Just because they've never had their women around when trouble was on the carpet is no reason that they will always keep that practice."

"Not even Bashti's got the savvy to pull a trick like that," Borckman objected. "He's just feeling good and liberal. Why, he's bought forty pounds of goods from you already. That's why he wants to sign on a new batch of boys with us, and I'll bet he's hoping half of them die so's he can have the spending of their wages."

All of which was most reasonable. Nevertheless, Van Horn shook his head.

"All the same keep your eyes sharp on everything," he cautioned. "And remember, the two of us mustn't ever be below at the same time. And no more schnapps, mind, until we're clear of the whole kit and caboodle."

Bashti was incredibly lean and prodigiously old. He did not know how old he was himself, although he did know that no person in his tribe had been alive when he was a young boy in the village. He remembered the days when some of the old men, still alive, had been born; and, unlike him, they were now decrepit, shaken with palsy, blear-eyed, toothless of mouth, deaf of ear, or paralysed. All his own faculties remained unimpaired. He even boasted a dozen worn fangs of teeth, gum-level, on which he could still chew. Although he no longer had the physical endurance of youth, his thinking was as original and clear as it had always been. It was due to his thinking that he found his tribe stronger than when he had first come to rule it. In his small way he had been a Melanesian Napoleon. As a warrior, the play of his mind had enabled him to beat back the bushmen's boundaries. The scars on his withered body attested that he had fought to the fore. As a Law-giver, he had encouraged and achieved strength and efficiency within his tribe. As a statesman, he had always kept one thought ahead of the thoughts of the neighbouring chiefs in the making of treaties and the granting of concessions.

And with his mind, still keenly alive, he had but just evolved a scheme whereby he might outwit Van Horn and get the better of the vast British Empire about which he guessed little and know less.

For Somo had a history. It was that queer anomaly, a salt-water tribe that lived on the lagoon mainland where only bushmen were supposed to live. Far back into the darkness of time, the folk-lore of Somo cast a glimmering light. On a day, so far back that there was no way of estimating its distance, one, Somo, son of Loti, who was the chief of the island fortress of Umbo, had quarrelled with his father and fled from his wrath along with a dozen canoe-loads of young men. For two monsoons they had engaged in an odyssey. It was in the myth that they circumnavigated Malaita twice, and forayed as far as Ugi and San Cristobal across the wide seas.

Women they had inevitably stolen after successful combats, and, in the end, being burdened with women and progeny, Somo had descended upon the mainland shore, driven the bushmen back, and established the salt-water fortress of Somo. Built it was, on its sea-front, like any island fortress, with walled coral-rock to oppose the sea and chance marauders from the sea, and with launching ways through the walls for the long canoes. To the rear, where it encroached on the jungle, it was like any scattered bush village. But Somo, the wide-seeing father of the new tribe, had established his boundaries far up in the bush on the shoulders of the lesser mountains, and on each shoulder had planted a village. Only the greatly daring that fled to him had Somo permitted to join the new

tribe. The weaklings and cowards they had promptly eaten, and the unbelievable tale of their many heads adorning the canoe-houses was part of the myth.

And this tribe, territory, and stronghold, at the latter end of time, Bashti had inherited, and he had bettered his inheritance. Nor was he above continuing to better it. For a long time he had reasoned closely and carefully in maturing the plan that itched in his brain for fulfilment. Three years before, the tribe of Ano Ano, miles down the coast, had captured a recruiter, destroyed her and all hands, and gained a fabulous store of tobacco, calico, beads, and all manner of trade goods, rifles and ammunition.

Little enough had happened in the way of price that was paid. Half a year after, a war vessel had poked her nose into the lagoon, shelled Ano Ano, and sent its inhabitants scurrying into the bush. The landing-party that followed had futilely pursued along the jungle runways. In the end it had contented itself with killing forty fat pigs and chopping down a hundred coconut trees. Scarcely had the war vessel passed out to open sea, when the people of Ano Ano were back from the bush to the village. Shell fire on flimsy grass houses is not especially destructive. A few hours' labour of the women put that little matter right. As for the forty dead pigs, the entire tribe fell upon the carcasses, roasted them under the ground with hot stones, and feasted. The tender tips of the fallen palms were likewise eaten, while the thousands of coconuts were husked and split and sun-dried and smoke-cured into copra to be sold to

the next passing trader.

Thus, the penalty exacted had proved a picnic and a feast--all of which appealed to the thrifty, calculating brain of Bashti. And what was good for Ano Ano, in his judgment was surely good for Somo. Since such were white men's ways who sailed under the British flag and killed pigs and cut down coconuts in cancellation of blood-debts and headtakings, Bashti saw no valid reason why he should not profit as Ano Ano had profited. The price to be paid at some possible future time was absurdly disproportionate to the immediate wealth to be gained. Besides, it had been over two years since the last British war vessel had appeared in the Solomons.

And thus, Bashti, with a fine fresh idea inside his head, bowed his chief's head in consent that his people could flock aboard and trade. Very few of them knew what his idea was or that he even had an idea.

Trade grew still brisker as more canoes came alongside and black men and women thronged the deck. Then came the recruits, new-caught, young, savage things, timid as deer, yet yielding to stern parental and tribal law and going down into the Arangi's cabin, one by one, their fathers and mothers and relatives accompanying them in family groups, to confront the big fella white marster, who wrote their names down in a mysterious book, had them ratify the three years' contract of their labour by a touch of the right hand to the pen with which he wrote, and who paid the first year's advance in trade goods to the heads of their respective

families.

Old Bashti sat near, taking his customary heavy tithes out of each advance, his three old wives squatting humbly at his feet and by their mere presence giving confidence to Van Horn, who was elated by the stroke of business. At such rate his cruise on Malaita would be a short one, when he would sail away with a full ship.

On deck, where Borckman kept a sharp eye out against danger, Jerry prowled about, sniffing the many legs of the many blacks he had never encountered before. The wild-dog had gone ashore with the return boys, and of the return boys only one had come back. It was Lerumie, past whom Jerry repeatedly and stiff-leggedly bristled without gaining response of recognition. Lerumie coolly ignored him, went down below once and purchased a trade hand-mirror, and, with a look of the eyes, assured old Bashti that all was ready and ripe to break at the first favourable moment.

On deck, Borckman gave this favourable moment. Nor would he have so given it had he not been guilty of carelessness and of disobedience to his captain's orders. He did not leave the schnapps alone. He did not sense what was impending all about him. Aft, where he stood, the deck was almost deserted. Amidships and for'ard, gamming with the boat's crew, the deck was crowded with blacks of both sexes. He made his way to the yam sacks lashed abaft the mizzenmast and got his bottle. Just before he drank, with a shred of caution, he cast a glance behind him.

Near him stood a harmless Mary, middle-aged, fat, squat, asymmetrical, unlovely, a sucking child of two years astride her hip and taking nourishment. Surely no harm was to be apprehended there. Furthermore, she was patently a weaponless Mary, for she wore no stitch of clothing that otherwise might have concealed a weapon. Over against the rail, ten feet to one side, stood Lerumie, smirking into the trade mirror he had just bought.

It was in the trade mirror that Lerumie saw Borckman bend to the yam-sacks, return to the erect, throw his head back, the mouth of the bottle glued to his lips, the bottom elevated skyward. Lerumie lifted his right hand in signal to a woman in a canoe alongside. She bent swiftly for something that she tossed to Lerumie. It was a long-handled tomahawk, the head of it an ordinary shingler's hatchet, the haft of it, native-made, a black and polished piece of hard wood, inlaid in rude designs with mother-of-pearl and wrapped with coconut sennit to make a hand grip. The blade of the hatchet had been ground to razor-edge.

As the tomahawk flew noiselessly through the air to Lerumie's hand, just as noiselessly, the next instant, it flew through the air from his hand into the hand of the fat Mary with the nursing child who stood behind the mate. She clutched the handle with both hands, while the child, astride her hip, held on to her with both small arms part way about her.

Still she waited the stroke, for with Borckman's head thrown back was no time to strive to sever the spinal cord at the neck. Many eyes beheld

the impending tragedy. Jerry saw, but did not understand. With all his hostility to niggers he had not divined the attack from the air. Tambi, who chanced to be near the skylight, saw, and, seeing, reached for a Lee-Enfield. Lerumie saw Tambi's action and hissed haste to the Mary.

Borckman, as unaware of this, his last second of life, as he had been of his first second of birth, lowered the bottle and straightened forward his head. The keen edge sank home. What, in that flash of instant when his brain was severed from the rest of his body, Borckman may have felt or thought, if he felt or thought at all, is a mystery unsolvable to living man. No man, his spinal cord so severed, has ever given one word or whisper of testimony as to what were his sensations and impressions. No less swift than the hatchet stroke was the limp placidity into which Borckman's body melted to the deck. He did not reel or pitch. He melted, as a sack of wind suddenly emptied, as a bladder of air suddenly punctured. The bottle fell from his dead hand upon the yams without breaking, although the remnant of its contents gurgled gently out upon the deck.

So quick was the occurrence of action, that the first shot from Tambi's musket missed the Mary ere Borckman had quite melted to the deck. There was no time for a second shot, for the Mary, dropping the tomahawk, holding her child in both her hands and plunging to the rail, was in the air and overboard, her fall capsizing the canoe which chanced to be beneath her.

Scores of actions were simultaneous. From the canoes on both sides uprose a glittering, glistening rain of mother-of-pearl-handled tomahawks that descended into the waiting hands of the Somo men on deck, while the Marys on deck crouched down and scrambled out of the fray. At the same time that the Mary who had killed Borckman leapt the rail, Lerumie bent for the tomahawk she had dropped, and Jerry, aware of red war, slashed the hand that reached for the tomahawk. Lerumie stood upright and loosed loudly, in a howl, all the pent rage and hatred, of months which he had cherished against the puppy. Also, as he gained the perpendicular and as Jerry flew at his legs, he launched a kick with all his might that caught and lifted Jerry squarely under the middle.

And in the next second, or fraction of second, as Jerry lifted and soared through the air, over the barbed wire of the rail and overboard, while Sniders were being passed up overside from the canoes, Tambi fired his next hasty shot. And Lerumie, the foot with which he had kicked not yet returned to the deck as again he was in mid-action of stooping to pick up the tomahawk, received the bullet squarely in the heart and pitched down to melt with Borckman into the softness of death.

Ere Jerry struck the water, the glory of Tambi's marvellously lucky shot was over for Tambi; for, at the moment he pressed trigger to the successful shot, a tomahawk bit across his skull at the base of the brain and darkened from his eyes for ever the bright vision of the sea-washed, sun-blazoned tropic world. As swiftly, all occurring almost simultaneously, did the rest of the boat's crew pass and the deck became

a shambles.

It was to the reports of the Sniders and the noises of the death scuffle that Jerry's head emerged from the water. A man's hand reached over a canoe-side and dragged him in by the scruff of the neck, and, although he snarled and struggled to bite his rescuer, he was not so much enraged as was he torn by the wildest solicitude for Skipper. He knew, without thinking about it, that the Arangi had been boarded by the hazily sensed supreme disaster of life that all life intuitively apprehends and that only man knows and calls by the name of "death." Borckman he had seen struck down. Lerumie he had heard struck down. And now he was hearing the explosions of rifles and the yells and screeches of triumph and fear.

So it was, helpless, suspended in the air by the nape of the neck, that he bawled and squalled and choked and coughed till the black, disgusted, flung him down roughly in the canoe's bottom. He scrambled to his feet and made two leaps: one upon the gunwale of the canoe; the next, despairing and hopeless, without consideration of self, for the rail of the Arangi.

His forefeet missed the rail by a yard, and he plunged down into the sea. He came up, swimming frantically, swallowing and strangling salt water because he still yelped and wailed and barked his yearning to be on board with Skipper.

But a boy of twelve, in another canoe, having witnessed the first black's adventure with Jerry, treated him without ceremony, laying, first the flat, and next the edge, of a paddle upon his head while he still swam. And the darkness of unconsciousness welled over his bright little love-suffering brain, so that it was a limp and motionless puppy that the black boy dragged into his canoe.

In the meantime, down below in the Arangi's cabin, ere ever Jerry hit the water from Lerumie's kick, even while he was in the air, Van Horn, in one great flashing profound fraction of an instant, had known his death. Not for nothing had old Bashti lived longest of any living man in his tribe, and ruled wisest of all the long line of rulers since Somo's time. Had he been placed more generously in earth space and time, he might well have proved an Alexander, a Napoleon, or a swarthy Kahehameha. As it was, he performed well, and splendidly well, in his limited little kingdom on the leeward coast of the dark cannibal island of Malaita.

And such a performance! In cool good nature in rigid maintenance of his chiefship rights, he had smiled at Van Horn, given royal permission to his young men to sign on for three years of plantation slavery, and exacted his share of each year's advance. Aora, who might be described as his prime minister and treasurer, had received the tithes as fast as they were paid over, and filled them into large, fine-netted bags of coconut sennit. At Bashti's back, squatting on the bunk-boards, a slim and smooth-skinned maid of thirteen had flapped the flies away from his royal head with the royal fly-flapper. At his feet had squatted his

three old wives, the oldest of them, toothless and somewhat palsied, ever presenting to his hand, at his head nod, a basket rough-woven of pandanus leaf.

And Bashti, his keen old ears pitched for the first untoward sound from on deck, had continually nodded his head and dipped his hand into the proffered basket--now for betel-nut, and lime-box, and the invariable green leaf with which to wrap the mouthful; now for tobacco with which to fill his short clay pipe; and, again, for matches with which to light the pipe which seemed not to draw well and which frequently went out.

Toward the last the basket had hovered constantly close to his hand, and, at the last, he made one final dip. It was at the moment when the Mary's axe, on deck, had struck Borckman down and when Tambi loosed the first shot at her from his Lee-Enfield. And Bashti's withered ancient hand, the back of it netted with a complex of large up-standing veins from which the flesh had shrunk away, dipped out a huge pistol of such remote vintage that one of Cromwell's round-heads might well have carried it or that it might well have voyaged with Quiros or La Perouse. It was a flint-lock, as long as a man's forearm, and it had been loaded that afternoon by no less a person than Bashti himself.

Quick as Bashti had been, Van Horn was almost as quick, but not quite quick enough. Even as his hand leapt to the modern automatic lying out of it's holster and loose on his knees, the pistol of the centuries went off. Loaded with two slugs and a round bullet, its effect was that of a

sawed-off shotgun. And Van Horn knew the blaze and the black of death, even as "Gott fer dang!" died unuttered on his lips and as his fingers relaxed from the part-lifted automatic, dropping it to the floor.

Surcharged with black powder, the ancient weapon had other effect. It burst in Bashti's hand. While Aora, with a knife produced apparently from nowhere, proceeded to hack off the white master's head, Bashti looked quizzically at his right forefinger dangling by a strip of skin. He seized it with his left hand, with a quick pull and twist wrenched it off, and grinningly tossed it, as a joke, into the pandanus basket which still his wife with one hand held before him while with the other she clutched her forehead bleeding from a flying fragment of pistol.

Collaterally with this, three of the young recruits, joined by their fathers and uncles, had downed, and were finishing off the only one of the boat's crew that was below. Bashti, who had lived so long that he was a philosopher who minded pain little and the loss of a finger less, chuckled and chirped his satisfaction and pride of achievement in the outcome, while his three old wives, who lived only at the nod of his head, fawned under him on the floor in the abjectness of servile congratulation and worship. Long had they lived, and they had lived long only by his kingly whim. They floundered and gibbered and mowed at his feet, lord of life and death that he was, infinitely wise as he had so often proved himself, as he had this time proved himself again.

And the lean, fear-stricken girl, like a frightened rabbit in the mouth

of its burrow, on hands and knees peered forth upon the scene from the lazarette and knew that the cooking-pot and the end of time had come for her.